Wheaton Public Library - History

HISTORY OF ADAMS MEMORIAL LIBRARY

How seldom as we look upon some fine building or enterprise which serves the public do our minds grasp the fact that back of all this which we use and enjoy was the thought of a single mind -- a tiny seed germinated and nursed with infinite patience and labor, a growth of years of thought and care, expanding, developing-- what we see and use and take for granted is the fruit --matured-- of that one thought in the mind of one person. I confess that although I have probably walked up the steps of our library many hundred times since I have lived in Wheaton, after having spent an afternoon with Mrs. Wells during which she told me many interesting things concerning the early history of the library, I never look at it or enter it without feeling a greater interest in it and a greater understanding of its aims and purposes. I wish she might tell you these things herself, but I shall try to recall some few of the facts for you.

The Library was dedicated on October 28, 1891, and was called "The Adams Memorial Library" being built by Mr. John Quincy Adams, father of Mrs. Wells as a memorial to his wife, and as a free library for the use of the citizens of Wheaton. Along with the building was given an endowment fund, the income of which was to be used to pay the running expenses, and to buy new books, and a gift of three thousand dollars in cash was made at the same time for the first purchase of books.

Previous to 1891 there was no public library in Wheaton, and no hall or gathering place where public entertainments could be held, except Central Hall which is over the Gary-Wheaton bank now

being remodeled. This Hall was rented and used by the Masons, and therefore many times unavailable for general use. So, when the present Library was built the large upper auditorium was a feature planned to fill a long-felt need. This room was available for entertainments, lectures, etc., and the lower room now used as a reading room was called "the Small Hall" and was for the purpose of housing smaller gatherings than the larger one. It was hoped that enough income could be realized from the rental of these two halls to help pay the running expenses, and for several years, or until the present churches were built, Baptist and Methodist especially, these rooms were used every winter for lecture courses, concerts, dramatic entertainments, etc., for which the Library Board charged a fee.

The first books were bought by the first library committee of five, and no book could be ordered that had not received the approval of at least three members of the five. This did not mean that all the books were read all through by each member, but the author or the content of the book must be familiar, and all must be satisfied as to its quality and suitability. Mrs. Wells said that McClurg's book firm was especially kind at this time and would put in a convenient place many of the books recommended and the various members of the committee, men in business in Chicago, or women in town for the day were free to some in at lunch hour or whenever they had a few spare moments and look the books over. In this way about 2700 books were purchased at the beginning. Mr. Adams himself was very particular as to the quality of the literature to be placed upon the shelves, but Mrs. Wells said he did not go quite so far, she thought, as the

late Mr. John Crerar, who is said to have made but two requests of his Trustees: one that the Library be built in Chicago, the other that they should not have in it "any of those dammed French books".

When the time came to classify the books the Board considered itself especially fortunate in obtaining the services of Miss Catherine Sharpe, of Evanston, the secretary of Mr. Melville Dewey of the New York State Library, the originator of what is known as the"Dewey Classification" a system now in vogue everywhere and recognised as the standard method of library classification. Mrs. Wells had read an article in a magazine telling of this man and his work in the New York State Library and wrote to him asking how such a system could be inaugurated here. He replied that Miss Sharpe, his secretary was living in Evanston and might be secured. So she came here every day from her home and with the help of a staff of five or six zealous young people, among them Miss Van Vliet of Oak Park, Miss Agnes Cole, Miss May Winston, Mrs. Wm. Shields, Mr. Albert Hammett, and Miss Adams, succeeded in classifying and preparing for use the nucleus of the library in accordance with the system during the vacation months. Wheaton was distinguished as being one of the first of the public libraries to use it, and is now recognised as one of the best classified libraries in the state. Miss Sharpe later on conducted her first Library School in Ill. while classifying the books of Armour Institute, and from there went to do the same work as first librarian of the Illinois State Library at Urbana.

It was stipulated by Mr. Adams that the Library Board consisting of nine members was to be undenominational, - that is, not more than three trustees were to be selected from any one church except

the Congregational (later the Presbyterian)

Some amusing incidents occurred in connection with the early days of the Library. When all these three thousand books were received, it looked like an Herculean task to get them ready, and so a small boy was hired to cut the pages, a most uninteresting job, which caused him to sigh and yawn so loudly he could be heard all over the first floor of the building. One winter when a lecture pr lyceum course was being conducted Dr. Frank Gonsaulus of Chicago was one of the speakers on the course. On the night he was due to appear the large audience gathered as usual and awaited the lecturer. Time passed but no Dr. Gunsaulus. It turned out that he had forgotten the engagement entirely, being so notoriously absentminded, that the street car conductors on lines where he was accustomed to ride kept a charge account for him knowing that if his wife failed to see that he had carfare he was very apt to be without it.

The first librarian was Miss Van Vliet, of Oak Park, who worked first with Miss Sharpe in classifying the books, thereby becoming familiar with the system, and then took the position of librarian. She was followed by Miss Jessie Van Vliet, who naturally received much help from her sister. Then came in the order of their service, Miss Maude Pugsley, Miss Miller, Miss Bess Baldwin, Miss Jean Scott, Miss LdCrone, Miss Montgomery, Miss Effever, LeFever?
Miss Boyd, whose devotion to her work was the indirect cause of her death, since she insisted on going to work one day during such a terrible storm that she contracted an illness which resulted in several years of intense suffering from a form of rheumatism before her death last January. Then came Miss Reber, who has given us such gracious and efficient service for the past five years,

and whom we hope to see there for a long time. I mention these names and also those of all the Trustees thinking that some here who have lived in Wheaton the greater part of their lives may recall the earlier members and be glad to give them tribute for all the time and thought they have spent in making possible the splendid institution to which we all have access. During the past thirty-five years the following twenty-two persons have served as Trustees - Mr. J. Q. Adams, Mr. J. S. Peironnet, who was an active member of the Board from its beginning up to a short time before his death which accurred during the past year, Mr. W. A. Shearson, Mr. Edward Hammett, Professor Elliott Whipple, Mr. William Nunn, Mr. Noah E. Gary, Miss Mary Drummond, Dr. C. S. Owen, Mr. W. P. Adams, Mr. O? D. Oyer, Mr. D. Pope, Mrs. M. S. Vernon, Mrs. J. L. Campbell, Mrs. F. L. Wells, Mr. F. L. Wells, Mr. C. A. Dollinger, Professor F. B. Russell, Mr. E. N. Lake, Mrs. Schuyler Reber, Mr. Ralph Wheaton, Mr. F. W. Adagte, Mr. Robert T. Nelson, the last nine named being the present Board, with the exception of Mr. Lake whose death occurred so recently and whose place has not yet been filled. J. B. Russell has since died and these two places are occupied by Mr. Tom McCarty, and Mr. Tom Llewelyn.

A few facts may be interesting as showing the growth and progress of the Library and also in tracing changed in thought and ideas during the past thirty-five years.

In the first place, quoting from the pamphlet which I have in my hand called "By-laws and Library Rules of the Adams Memorial Library", dated 1891, I find (quote pages 20, 21, 23, 24, 29, 30,)we see that changed have taken place in some respects.

For the first 10 or 12 years there was a printed catalog for the use of the patrons of the Library at home, as well as the card Index at the Library.

In 1901 the Children's Room was opened for the first time This was on Saturdays only from 2 to 5 P. M.

In 1902 an extra card for non-fiction books was issued to each person holding a fiction card, thus allowing two books out at a time to each card holder.

In 1902 cards were issued to all children even under twelve who were able to fill out the application and provide proper guarantee.

In 1903 the question of opening the Library on Sundays was propsedd but was vetoed.

For eleven years dating from 1891 the building was open two days a week only, Wednesdays and Saturdays, but on September 1, 1904 the present schedule was adopted of opening six days a week, afternoons and evenings, except holidays and Sundays.

During the first twenty-five years 318,567 books were loaned, an average of 12,743 a year. In a town of not over 3,000 people and almost hald of the time there were but two days in the week in which they could be borrowed. Then during the war years few books were written, and the people were too bust to read, and out library felt with all others the drop in circulation statistics and the use of the Reference Room. Since then the increase has been rapid, especially the past three years while Wheaton has been experiencing a parallel growth, the circulation for last year being about 30,000. In this connection a comment on the reading habits of the public is interesting. The demand for non-fiction books is steadily increasing, over one-fifth of the entire circulation for the past year having been of that class.

One might draw various conclusions from this fact, but it would surely seem that it denoted a wider interest in adstract and serious subjects in spite of our tendency to deplore the flippancy and superficiality of our times. Of course, it might also indicate dissatisfaction with present-day fiction.

The first Women's Club in Wheaton (The Study Club) after having been organized by Mrs. Wells, and having met in h er home previous to the building of the Library, met in the present Children's room, while the Library was open only two days a week. Small dances were also held in the "Small Hall".

For some time there were no open shelves, that is, the public was not permitted the freedom of the book shelves, only those especially favored being seen behind the window which opens on the space reserved for books. At that time there was no window on the south side of the reading room, but this was put in so that the Librarian who then had her desk on the east of the lobby could keep an eye on the youthful occupants of the Reading Room.

For several years a Story Hour for children was conducted in the Children's Room, different ladies of Wheaton volunteering their services, also several of the librarians who were especially apt at that sort of thing.

A word in regard to the building itself may not be out of place. An architect of some note while in Wheaton made the statement that from his point of view Wheaton had a real example of fine architecture in this building. In proportion, in gracefulness of outline, in material chosen for building purposes, the best judgment had been used and the result was a real triumph.

On October 30, 1923 a contract was entered into whereby the City of Wheaton took over the management of the building and

contents from the Adams Memorial Library Board. An additional Board, called the "Wheaton Public Library Board" was created which became responsible for the expenditure of the tax levied by the City for the support of the library. This tax is to be used for heating, lighting, payment of Librarian and Janitor, purchase of circulating books, subscriptions to periodicals, and newspapers, insurance on the books, and some other minor items. The Adams Memorial Board continues to own the building and all of the contents it has bought and special assessment taxes. The income from the endowment fund is used for the upkeep of the building and its insurance and for the new furnishings and special assessment taxes. Any surplus after these expenses are met is to be used for purchase of reference books or reference periodicals.

In August 1925, the latter Board furnished the present reference room and placed most of the reference books there, greatly facilitation the work of students.

The number of volumes in the library at the present is about 8,500, nearly 2,000 having been added during the past three years since the City money has been available for their purchase.

Perhaps few of us realize the amount of work involved in putting a book into circulation. This process means handling each book seven times. The procedure is as follows: First, it is checked from the bill. Next, its class number and author number must be determined according to the Dewey System. Then it is recorded in what is called the Accession book. There are twelve items regarding every book which must be recorded. These are: Its accession number, title, place of publication, publisher, daye of publication, pages, kind of binding, from whom bought, and cost and the book

properly opened. It is then embossed with the Library stamp. Several items are then written on the inside of the title page, including the accession number, Two pockets are placed on the indide of the covers and cards propared for these pockets. The author and class number are then placed on the ourside of the back of the book with the electric stylus.

(I have a few of the books which were among the first lot purchased which I shall be glad to have you examine)

As I glance through the pa[illegible] from which I read the rules and by-laws, Mrs. Wells' name occurs many times on the lists of committees. During all these years she has given unsparingly of her time and energy and thought to make this Library a real public servant. When whe travels she visits other libraries to see other buildings and equipment and is always able to turn back with a feeling of pride in the one she has so generously fostered. When we consider that for thrity-five years Wheaton has had an institution comparing favorably with those in towns many times its size, we may indeed be grateful to those who chose this splendid and lasting type of memorial.